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books. And it isn't unusual for a toddler to request to hear the same book read fifty or a hundred times as a bedtime story. So what happens to make those little book lovers such adamant book haters?

We adults are responsible—for making them read before they are ready, demanding that they read faster than they are able, embarrassing or shaming them for reading poorly, requiring them to read aloud when they don't feel confident, and forcing them to read books they don't enjoy. Although our intentions may be good (we want children to learn to read), our results are often very bad indeed. We take one of life's most enjoyable pastimes and most essential skills and turn it into a dreaded experience. Tragically, many people become lifetime nonreaders because of those dreadful childhood experiences.

### OUR FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH READING INFLUENCES OUR PERCEPTION OF OURSELVES

If you ask adults, "Do you consider yourself above average, about average, or below average?" most of them have a clear picture of where they fall on the intelligence spectrum. But what I find most interesting is that when I ask those same adults how old they were when they formed their opinions of their own intelligence, nearly all agree that they decided how smart they were during the first few years of school, when they were learning to read. Call them bluebirds and sparrows, stars and stripes, bears and bobcats, children always know who are the fast readers (translate "smart kids") and who are the slow readers (translate "dumb kids"). They know exactly where they fall on the reading-speed spectrum, and they believe this correlates to intelligence. Most of them will believe for the rest of their lives that they are smart or dumb or average, depending on how quickly and well they learned to read.

Because so many people carry the imprint of their first experience with reading for so many years, I encourage elementary school teachers to group students randomly, instead of by reading ability or speed. Of course, in a perfect world, students would receive individual instruction in this crucial skill; but we must deal with our imperfect schools. Also I encourage teachers to allow students to read at their own pace, even if it means that those slower students don't cover as much ground as their quicker classmates. Parents repeatedly ask me to tutor young children whose teachers have claimed that a learning disability prevents the children from learning to read. Invariably, the real problem turns out to be speed. Those

children simply can't read at the fast rate that their teachers demand. When they are allowed to read at their own individual pace, those children do learn to read. One young girl went from failing grades to straight As in less than two months after I convinced her to take her time and stop trying to race through her reading.

Children don't have many options when their teachers insist that they read at a rate that is too fast for them. They are unable to articulate their frustration, so they choose one of the two obvious behaviors that occur to them: they either try to blast through the reading, skipping any words that are unfamiliar or difficult to pronounce, or they quit trying altogether (and perhaps become behavior problems instead of problem readers). Some poor little people become victims of psychosomatic illnesses that literally make them sick when they have to face another day in the classroom. My youngest brother, who struggled very hard to learn to read, often vomited in the mornings before school because reading was such a traumatic experience for him. When my older sister and I finally identified his problem and worked together to help our brother learn to read, his illnesses immediately disappeared, and his grades shot up from failing to above average.

### THE PROBLEM

People who hate reading don't read well. That makes sense. We don't like doing things we do poorly, especially when we have to do those things in public. But reading is so important that we teachers must discover why our students don't like reading if we expect them to be successful in school and in the workplace. Without good reading skills, school becomes a painful struggle; and students either flounder, fail, or drop out. Unfortunately, high intelligence can camouflage a reading problem for years. Just as a blind person's sense of hearing becomes more acute, a poor reader may develop much sharper skills to compensate. Poor readers are often expert memorizers and mimics. They become excellent readers of body language as well, taking their cues from the slightest change in a teacher's facial expression or posture. And poor readers are often able to mask their lack of reading comprehension until they become freshmen in high school, at which time the textbooks and concepts become too complex or abstract to memorize. They can't solve math problems if they can't read and understand the problems, regardless of their intelligence; and they can't memorize an entire biology text.

When I began teaching disenchanted students and remedial readers, I used to wonder how so many students arrived in my high school classroom unable to

read and comprehend the simplest books. Many of them admitted that they had attended school for ten years but had never read a single book, aside from those that teachers force-fed to them. *What were their teachers thinking, passing these students on to the next level, when they clearly couldn't read?* I wondered. Then I started corresponding with those students in their journals and working with them individually, and I learned how good they were at hiding their poor reading skills.

I began conducting informal surveys in each new class on the first day of school, asking, "How many of you love reading?" A few always raise their hands. Then I ask, "How many hate reading?" Usually half the hands in the room wave wildly, churning up the air with their negativity. We usually spend twenty or thirty minutes discussing our feelings about reading and why those who hate reading feel the way they do. Following are the reasons that my antireading students (ages six to fifty-one) have repeatedly given to explain why they hate reading:

1. Reading gives them a headache or makes their eyes hurt.
2. They believe they are going to be embarrassed because teachers are going to force them to read out loud and other students are going to laugh at them. (Sadly, sometimes teachers laugh too.)
3. They expect to be required to read so much material of no interest to them.
4. They know they will be required to finish reading everything they start in class, no matter how long, how difficult, or how boring it may be.
5. They know they are going to be tested on what they read, which makes reading a chore instead of a means of gaining information, seeing new perspectives, or being entertained.
6. They get lost when they are reading because they lack basic comprehension skills.
7. They believe that catching up is hopeless. When they read below their grade level, they don't understand that increasing their skills to the next level won't take a full calendar year. A ninth grader whose test score places him at a fourth-grade level, for example, thinks he will run out of time before he can catch up with his peers.
8. They believe they are going to be asked to state their opinion of a book or story verbally or in writing but that they will earn a bad grade for telling the truth. They know that the teacher expects them to agree with his or her opinion of the material. If students say they don't like a book or story, the teacher will argue with them or make them feel stupid for not appreciating it.

## THE SOLUTIONS

I would like to suggest the following solutions to the eight problems that those antireading students identified.

### 1. Discuss Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome with Your Students

Recent research suggests that nearly half of people who are labeled as learning disabled actually suffer from scotopic sensitivity syndrome—a sensitivity to light. People with scotopic sensitivity find reading difficult and sometimes painful when the material is printed on glossy paper. Fluorescent lighting or other lights that cause glare on the page make reading even more difficult. High-contrast print, such as black letters on white paper, is the most difficult for people with scotopic sensitivity to read. Unfortunately, such high-contrast print is the most common format for texts and other school materials.

You may notice some students who lean over their desks and wrap one arm around their books and papers. Sometimes teachers assume those students are trying to protect or hide their books and papers; often those students are trying to create a shadow to make reading easier. Many students prefer to wear baseball caps with the brims low over their eyes for the same reason—not simply to rebel.

Perhaps after an extended period of reading, you may have the feeling that the page is making your eyes burn, or you find yourself rubbing your eyes to clear your vision. This will give you an idea of what reading feels like all the time to people with scotopic sensitivity. And sadly, the harder they try to focus and concentrate, the worse the irritation or pain becomes. I have even had students whose eyes turn red and teary after just a few minutes of reading. Even more sadly, many students who struggle with scotopic sensitivity find themselves placed in special education classes or programs for behavior-disordered children because they refuse to read in class or they misbehave in order to avoid having to read.

Quite often, scotopic readers love stories and enjoy hearing them read aloud. They participate in group reading assignments and may have excellent comprehension skills. When you ask those students to read on their own, however, their behavior changes dramatically. If you have students who are generally cooperative but start to wiggle and squirm as soon as you ask them to read independently, be alert for signs that reading is uncomfortable for them. They may squint, frown, rub their eyes, try to shade their books with their hands or bodies, hold their books far away or very near to their faces, blink rapidly, or lose their place repeatedly

when reading. Often schools mislabel scotopic readers as dyslexic (they may or may not suffer from dyslexia, as well) and give them tutoring to provide strategies that don't work, because the glare and discomfort remain.

If you haven't heard of scotopic sensitivity, your best source of information is the Internet. Be sure to check the sponsors of any Web sites you visit to make sure that they are reputable. A number of universities and education organizations offer links and resources, as do independent consulting firms. Many Web sites will offer testimonials from people who have used transparent colored overlays or filters with great success.

In my own experience, about one-half of a given class of remedial readers showed signs of scotopic sensitivity and responded positively and immediately to using overlays to read. Other teachers have reported similar success. One teacher in Illinois sent me an e-mail to let me know the results of preliminary testing in her school district. With schools in six different towns and only one testing packet to use, it took some time for teachers to test all of the struggling readers, but the teacher wrote, "the results are astounding—about 50 percent of our students noticed a significant difference with the overlays. We used a self-test first that I found online, and it amazed me how many of the questions were checked yes for most of our students. . . . We just received our full-size sheets, so I'll be waiting for feedback from our teachers."

An educational consultant from Raleigh, North Carolina, told me about her experience testing students at a local high school. The principal asked her to test one of the students who used foul language, disrupted class, was in recovery for recreational drug use, and had been repeatedly suspended from school. Because the boy kept returning, the principal had given him multiple second chances.

"The boy was very responsive to my questions," the consultant told me. "After he was screened and tested and received his overlay, his grades went from failing to As in English after only three weeks. His principal called to tell me about the success that he has had, and they called me back to screen thirty more students. Twenty-eight were scotopic. One boy even seemed to have a tic, but he was just trying to following the swirling lights that he saw when he tried to read, jerking his head. Another boy said he saw red, green, gold, and blue sparkles on the page."

A number of good Internet sites for information exist, but you might start with [www.nrsi.com](http://www.nrsi.com) or [www.irlen.com](http://www.irlen.com) or search for the scientific studies of Dr. Paul R. Whiting, who published the journal article, "How Difficult Can Reading Be?" when he was on the faculty at the University of Sydney.

Also, be alert for new research on what is being termed vision therapy, vision convergence problems, or developmental optometry. Having 20/20 visual acuity doesn't automatically mean that a student has no vision problems. An August 2004 news release from the College of Optometrists in Vision Development reports that because symptoms may be quite similar, visual disorders caused by faulty skill patterns may be "misdiagnosed as learning disability or ADHD." The article reports that students who fail to respond to ADHD medication can experience dramatic improvement with vision therapy. To read more about vision therapy for problem readers, visit [www.covd.org](http://www.covd.org).

## 2. Make Reading Aloud Purely Voluntary in Your Classroom

Attendance, punctuality, and morale will improve if you stop forcing students to read aloud. Let students volunteer if they choose. Urge them to try. Don't allow other kids to laugh at the ones who do read, and beware the sneaky snickers. If you ask students to read aloud in your classroom, you owe it to your readers to make sure that nobody shames or humiliates them for trying. And if you have shy or timid students who refuse to volunteer, listen to them individually until they develop the confidence to read aloud (some kids will never volunteer, but that doesn't mean they aren't learning; and at least you won't have made them dread reading).

Many teachers insist that all students must read aloud. My response to those teachers is, "Why? What do you gain from forcing students to read aloud that is so valuable it outweighs their embarrassment, their stomach aches, their sweaty palms, their heartaches, and their reluctance to enter your classroom?" I would also ask, "If your current method isn't working, why not try a different approach? You don't have to continue if the new approach doesn't work, but if it does work, your students are the winners."

Some teachers call on students to read aloud as a way of keeping them awake or alert in class, but you could call on a volunteer who is seated next to your drowsy or daydreaming student. When his classmate begins to read, the daydreamer will tune back in, without feeling embarrassment or hostility toward you.

And finally, if you require students to read out loud simply because your own teachers required you to read out loud, I urge you to find some of your classmates who hated reading and ask them how they felt. Most teachers enjoyed school. We enjoyed reading. We don't know how it feels to hate reading so much that we are willing to jeopardize our own grades—even drop out of school—in order to avoid

reading out loud. We need to have more empathy if we truly want to help our struggling readers.

### 3. Offer Reading Materials That Are Truly Interesting and Relevant to Students' Lives

Scholars can be convinced to read anything in order to analyze and evaluate it; poor readers, struggling readers, and students who are still in the process of developing good critical thinking skills cannot be convinced. But those struggling readers will flourish if you give them material that is so interesting that they forget they are reading.

Find some compelling magazine articles, essays on controversial subjects, or exciting stories. Many boys hate fiction. They simply cannot or will not suspend their disbelief long enough to become engaged. But they will read nonfiction—about bugs, dinosaurs, race cars, computers, sports, space ships, inventors, dragons. If you allow those children who dislike fiction to read nonfiction until they become good readers, they will be better able and more inclined to read fiction when you ask them to. You will have taught them that books can be enjoyable but that sometimes we need to read something we aren't wild about in order to learn a new thinking skill.

Read your selections as a group, but instead of announcing that you are going to read something, simply distribute the story. Let your students look it over on their own. Some of them will begin immediately. Others will wait for your cue. If your quick starters begin making comments about the story, don't hush them up. Their comments will create interest and entice other students to read. Let them talk for a while, unless they begin shouting. Then ask them if they would mind backing up so that you can read the entire selection together as a class in order to discuss it afterward. (If some students ignore you and continue reading ahead on their own, let them go, as long as they are polite. They aren't holding anybody back, and they will probably reread the selection along with the class after they have finished it. It is very frustrating for fast readers to be held back. Many of them will shut down mentally or become disruptive out of boredom. So, if you can give up some of the desire to control and let them read ahead, you will be doing everybody a service, including yourself.)

Teach your students to analyze the reading selections and articulate their opinions about what they are reading. Explain that we need to be able to evaluate whatever we read and intelligently articulate our opinions in order to be successful in

school. Even little children will have an opinion about whether a story is interesting, informative, or exciting; whether characters are good or bad; whether descriptions paint vivid pictures; and whether the ending satisfies the reader. Prompt your students. Ask questions: Why do they dislike certain stories and books? Is the vocabulary too hard? Can they give some examples of difficult vocabulary words? Are the sentences too long and complex or too short and choppy? Are the characters unlikable or unbelievable? Is the plot too unrealistic? Where does the plot become unbelievable? Is the pace of the story too slow or fast? Is there too little dialogue? Or is it hard to tell who is talking?

If your compelling reading selection is short, ask the students to read the entire selection and then respond verbally or write their critiques. If your selection is longer, consider allowing students to read just enough so that they can write a valid critique, and then allow them to stop reading and start writing. If, after you have taught your students to intelligently analyze and evaluate reading material, students complain that a book is boring or stupid, you can explain that *boring* and *stupid* are not acceptable adjectives to describe a book or story. Students must be able to explain exactly why they do not like a given selection. Validate their opinions, as long as they state those opinions in an intelligent, articulate manner.

When you first begin to work with a group of reluctant readers and you must use a required reading list, at the very least let your students vote on the order in which they will read the books so that they don't feel quite so powerless. If more than half of your class dislikes a book or story, find out why, and consider replacing that selection with another that is equally challenging but more interesting to them.

One activity that I've used with good success is the book exchange. I get a number of books from the public or school library on a wide array of topics, from spaceships to teen romance novels to horror stories. Then I place a book on each student's desk before class begins. Students read the books on their desks for five minutes, then give the book a rating of one to ten and jot down a few quick notes on an index card. They exchange books and read for another five minutes, then rate the book and take notes. They repeat this until they have read at least five books. If they like a particular book, they can keep the book. Students who don't like any of the books continue to exchange books until they find something they like. Some students may have to spend a class period (or two) in the library doing their own book exchange before they can locate something irresistible. It's worth your time and theirs to allow them this opportunity.

#### 4. Allow Students to Decide Not to Finish Reading a Given Assignment

Instead of forcing reluctant readers to finish books and stories that they clearly dislike or materials that are far beyond their abilities, give them the option of stopping. A challenge is good, but an impossible task is not. Students cannot read simply for the sake of reading until they become good readers. Good readers will tackle anything because they know that although sometimes reading requires real effort, they will be rewarded by gaining a new perspective, acquiring new knowledge, encountering an exciting but unfamiliar idea, experiencing a brain tickle, entering a completely new world, or simply enjoying the satisfaction of having conquered a difficult mental challenge. Poor readers don't experience those rewards, so you cannot convince them that reading is enjoyable until they learn to read well enough to forget that they are reading.

One of the quickest ways to discourage poor readers from becoming good readers is to make them finish reading things that they hate. This suggestion may go against your teacherly grain, but I urge you to consider it: promise your students that you will expect them to read half of any article, novel, nonfiction book, essay, story, or dramatic play that you give to them. At the halfway point, you will take a vote by show of hands to see whether the majority of your class wants to finish the given selection. If more than half of the students vote against the reading material, put it away. Allow students to finish it on their own if they choose, but do not pursue the reading as a class. Ask students to write a brief critique of the selection, and then move on to the next activity (I'd suggest doing a nonreading activity next).

Let me explain why I make this suggestion. In one of my high school classes, students were reading the short story, "The Birds," by Daphne DeMaurier. When they saw the story listed in the table of contents in their literature textbooks, they were excited about reading it because it sounded scary and some of them had seen the movie or heard about it. They looked forward to reading the story, writing their critiques, and then watching the film. Halfway through the story, I noticed that several heads were drooping and more than a few students were sound asleep.

After rousing the sleepers, I said, "I thought you guys were looking forward to reading this story. What happened?" They didn't know, but they were clearly disappointed with the story. Nobody wanted to finish reading, so I put the students in small groups and asked them to figure out why they didn't like the story as well as they had expected. In their critiques they concluded that the story was written

in an "old-fashioned style," with stilted language and far too little dialogue. Some students argued that what might have seemed thrilling and scary when the author wrote the story was no longer frightening to people who had seen so many horror movies with incredible special effects. They thought the sentence and paragraph structure was too complex and contributed to the story's slow feel.

"Fine," I said, after reading their critiques. "Let's stop reading this story and find something more interesting."

"For real?" several students asked.

"Yes, I'm serious," I said.

"You mean we don't have to finish this?"

"No," I said. "In real life, if you don't like something, you don't have to finish it. When you go to the library and check out ten books, you don't have to read them; you don't have to write a book report on them. You can read one chapter—or one page—from each book and then take them back. And you can keep doing that until you find some books you want to read. After a while you learn what styles of writing appeal to you and what subjects and ideas interest you. Those are the things you read."

"That's cool," one student said. "But do we get to watch the movie anyway?"

"No," I said. "If we don't finish reading something, we don't watch the movie version, if there is one. We don't have a test. We write our critiques, have a short discussion, and then go on to something else."

Those students responded so enthusiastically to the "something else" that I made "read half-take a vote" my standard policy for reading with any remedial class or any class in which I have several reluctant readers. Of course, when I announce the policy, students always grin and warn me that we aren't ever going to finish anything because they are going to vote it down. Especially Shakespeare, they say. We know we aren't going to vote to read that hard stuff. But I have never had a class, regardless of how much they hate reading, vote to discontinue reading *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Othello*, or *The Merchant of Venice*. (I will discuss my approach to teaching Shakespeare in detail later in this chapter.)

I believe that one of the reasons this approach is so successful is that it gives students the feeling that they have a choice in what they read. And once they know that they can vote to stop reading a story or novel, they will often continue reading because they don't feel compelled to rebel just for the sake of rebelling. (Note: once in a while, a group will start voting down everything, just to be obnoxious. In that case I assign a really long and difficult reading assignment, so that by the

time they reach the halfway mark, they are more than willing to be more receptive to the next short selection I offer them.)

### **5. Read Some Things Without Having a Test Afterward**

Occasionally ask what students think of what they've read, without testing them. Hold a brief discussion and thank them for their cooperation. Period. Show them that reading isn't a test; it's a skill, and we don't have to test our skill level each time we use a skill. We simply use it. Let them read some things just for the sake of reading them, so that they learn from their own experience that reading is not a chore but a means of gaining information, tickling our brains, or being entertained.

When you do test students, don't use the same format for every test. Instead of asking them to select the correct answer on a multiple-choice or matching quiz, try open-ended short essay questions. Ask why they think a particular character acted the way he or she did. Ask them to think of three good adjectives to describe a specific character and give examples of things those characters said or did to support the students' choice of adjectives. Ask them to rate the story's conclusion and explain why they would give it a thumbs-up or thumbs-down.

### **6. Teach Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension**

Some students get lost when they are reading. One boy described his experience: "It's like I'm reading one of those signs in front of the bank where the letters move. As soon as I read the words, they disappear."

You don't have to be a reading teacher to give students some basic pointers on reading comprehension. First, explain that when we read, we create a mental picture of what we are reading. As we add details, the picture becomes more clear or changes to adjust to new or different information. If you lose the picture when you are reading, you are starting to lose your comprehension. Back up until you can see the picture again, and continue reading. If you do this as a class, with a story or article, you can read a paragraph, ask students what they see, and discuss their different visions. This will help students who still don't get it to understand what you are talking about. Then read the next paragraph and stop again to ask students to describe their mental pictures. When I do this with a class, even with adults, they usually become very excited because they finally (some for the first time) understand what all the fuss is about and why some people enjoy reading. This exercise works far better than simply asking questions to check their comprehension after

they have read a selection, because students with poor comprehension don't understand why they can't remember information and other students can.

Another option is to use books on tape, either commercial or homemade. I have made a number of tapes on which I read material for my classes. I play the tape in class, and the students follow along. This helps them learn pacing and phrasing, and it frees them to focus on maintaining a mental picture, instead of worrying about pronunciation. I ask them to listen to the entire selection once and then ask questions before we listen a second time. And of course, we know that students learn better when they teach what they have learned, so asking students to read something and then give a summary to another student who hasn't read that selection is also a good activity.

If you detect serious comprehension problems, or if a student asks for more help, find out if your school has a reading specialist on the staff or as a regular visitor. If not, check with your local library to see if it has a literacy program, and encourage your students to attend the free sessions. Also, look for good Web sites devoted to reading. Do an Internet search for "online reading instruction," and you will find a plethora of books, articles, exercises, games, and instructional materials.

### **7. Give Your Struggling Readers Hope**

Give them a pep talk before and after any standardized reading exam. Discuss test-taking strategies, and provide sample questions for them to practice. And above all, emphasize that reading is a skill like any other skill; they must practice in order to improve. Although most intelligent people read well, reading is not an indication of intelligence. It is a skill that intelligent people have worked to master.

"Even NBA All-Stars have to practice," I remind my students. "You don't get good at anything without practice, even if you are born with talent. Tiger Woods practices all the time; so do professional musicians, singers, rappers, poets, writers, dancers, and race car drivers."

Explain that a grade level in reading doesn't correspond to a calendar year. It is just a measure of how well a student reads a specific level of complexity in vocabulary and sentence structure. Encourage them to learn how to derive the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context of a sentence and to practice reading every day in order to improve their reading rate. One method I have used successfully is to copy some generic magazine article or selection from a textbook that is one or two pages long. I distribute copies of the pages and ask students not to begin reading

until my signal. When I say, "Begin," everybody starts reading. They read for one full minute until I say, "Stop." They circle the last word they read. Then I teach them how to count the words on a page without counting every single word. Count the number of words in four individual lines, then add the numbers and divide by four to get the average number of words per line. Then the students count how many lines they read, multiply that by the average, and get a word count for one minute. They write that number down in the margin, and I collect the papers. We put the reading-rate papers away for a month, but we work on our reading skills with other materials every single day.

At the end of the month, we read the same reading-rate selection again and see how many words we have read. Students will nearly always improve if they have been making an effort in class. This shows them that practice doesn't make perfect, but it certainly makes improvement. Give them verbal praise and put the papers away for another month. When the material starts to sound familiar, give them a new reading-rate page.

### 8. Respect Each Student's Right to His or Her Opinions

So many students—most with tears in their eyes—have told me about the same experience: a teacher asked them to write their opinion about a book or story. The students worked hard on their essays and expected high marks for effort and content. Their teachers either assigned a D or F with no explanation or wrote some insulting comment such as "Wrong!" or "This is ridiculous!" in red ink across the top of the paper. In addition to doling out low grades and making students doubt their own intelligence, those teachers sent a clear message to the students: your opinion is worthless. If you ask for an opinion, accept what you get and grade the writing on composition and content—not on whether the student agrees with your opinion. Certainly, you can appreciate the literary merit of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Great Expectations*, and *Julius Caesar*; but sometimes young people simply aren't able to appreciate things we think they should appreciate. Instead of belittling them or lowering their grades when they don't get it, reward their honest effort and encourage them to develop their ideas logically and completely. If you allow your students to maintain their dignity and self-respect, they will continue to try and continue to progress. With maturity and practice, their reading and writing skills will improve; and they will be better able to appreciate literature that demands a more sophisticated approach.

## SHAKESPEARE FOR RELUCTANT READERS

Before I ever mention Shakespeare to my students, I make sure that they know I care about them and truly have their best interests at heart. I want them to trust me when I tell them that I am not going to give them the standard style of test: they won't have to memorize Shakespeare's birth date and birthplace, draw a picture of the Globe Theatre, or identify the speaker of random quotes from whatever play we have studied. (Later, after they have read some of his works, students tend to be interested in the historical details and I include them in our lessons and discussions, but not as test items.)

I promise my students that I will not make them hate Shakespeare. And I also promise that after we have read exactly half of the first play, we will take a class vote. If the majority of the students want to stop, we will close the books and move on to something else without any penalty, although I will ask for their reasons for not wanting to continue and we will not watch the movie version. (I have never had a class that opted to quit reading; students always want to know the ending because William tells a good tale.)

When a class seems ready to read Shakespeare, I tell them that I think it would be a good idea for us to read one of his plays just for fun (of course, they protest that it won't be fun). I explain that we won't read his work just because he is one of the "boring dead white guys" in the literary canon but because he was an intensely talented and prolific writer. Quotations from Shakespeare appear in so many aspects of world culture that being unfamiliar with his works puts students at a disadvantage in society (fickle men are often referred to as Romeos, for example; and people giving speeches sometimes begin by saying, "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears"). In addition, every college student in the United States and Europe is expected to have read at least a few plays and sonnets at some time during high school.

Students usually protest that Shakespeare is too hard to read. I assure them that reading Shakespeare requires effort: some people spend four or more years in college just studying his work. But difficult doesn't mean impossible.

"There is nothing wrong with your brains," I explain. "Ideas don't have grade levels. You can think about things just as well as the next person, even the kids in advanced placement classes. Your reading skills may need some help, but that's why you have me. I will help you with the reading."

## USE MUSIC TO INTRODUCE POETRY

Because so many of my students hated reading or had described their negative experiences with English classes, I knew that if I announced that we would be reading poetry, I would lose them before we began. So I decided to sneak in the back door with a little rhythm and rhyme. In the movie *Dangerous Minds*, the producers took some liberties when they portrayed my approach. Yes, I did use song lyrics, but not Bob Dylan's "Tambourine Man." Instead, I typed out the words to the Public Enemy rap song "911 Is a Joke," Smokey Robinson's "Tears of a Clown," an English translation of the Hispanic folk song "Guantanamera," and the Garth Brooks hit "We Shall Be Free." When my students walked into class, I distributed the lyrics without saying anything.

"What's this?" they asked.

"Something I think is interesting," I said. After a few minutes, one of the kids said, "Hey, I know this song." Several private conversations sprang up around the room. Finally, somebody said, "Hey, Miss J, how come you gave us these songs?"

"I wanted to know if you think they are poetry," I said. (I love it when the kids play right along with my script.)

"Poetry?" a few kids mumbled. They shrugged and looked at each other. "Is this poetry?"

"You tell me," I insisted. "You know what a poem is, don't you?"

"Yeah," they said. "Poems rhyme."

"Is that all poems have? Just rhymes? Do all poems rhyme?"

"They got rhythm too," somebody else interjected.

"Right. Poems have rhythm or rhyme and sometimes both," I said. I held up the lyrics sheet. "So is this poetry?"

"You're the teacher," one girl said. "You tell us if it's poetry."

"You're the student," I said. "You tell me. Take your time. Think about it. Feel free to discuss it among yourselves. I'll wait." And I sat down with a very patient look on my face.

After a few minutes, one of the boys ventured a tentative, "I think they're poems. They all have music, and music has rhythm. And most of them rhyme."

"I agree," I said. "I think many song lyrics are poetic, and the best songs are very good poetry. And I'm going to give you the opportunity to bring in your favorite song lyrics to share with the class." Several students applauded. Some cheered. Nobody protested.

"What if we don't have the words?" one girl asked.

"If the CD or cassette doesn't provide lyrics, you can check the Internet to see if you can find the words. Or you can listen to the song several times and write them down. I'll type them for you."

Those students were ready. Some of them opened their notebooks and began singing to themselves, jotting down song lyrics.

"But there is one condition," I added. "You will need to explain to the class why you admire your particular song choice as good poetry."

"That's it?" a boy asked. "We just have to say why it's a good poem?"

"Yes," I said. "That's it. One little condition. So who's interested?" Nearly every student raised his or her hand. "Good. But in order to explain why your song is good poetry, you're going to have to learn the language of poetry. If you'll bear with me for a week or so, I'll teach you how to talk about poems."

A few kids frowned, but before they could voice the suggestion that they had been had once again, I launched into my introductory lesson on onomatopoeia. Slam! Bam! Pow! Ping! Before they knew what had hit them, those students were reading poetry.

I'd like to share with you the results of that first poetry experiment with those antireading students. Everybody in that class, including me, expressed very distinct preferences for music. Before we started that project, I dismissed the idea that any student could find a poetic heavy metal song, but somebody did. Very few of those students had been introduced to jazz, and many of them became big fans. And students who claimed they hated rap or country found themselves responding to the lyrics of songs when we read them without hearing the music. We discovered that it was often the beat we disliked, not the song itself. Students from very disparate backgrounds realized that they shared common emotions and dreams. Also I learned that filthy, disgusting racist, sexist, or violence-promoting songs can't be passed off as good poetry. One young man (an angry young man who usually sat with his arms crossed and his mouth clamped shut during our class discussions) brought in a rap song filled with profanity and obscene language. Instead of dismissing his song choice, I asked him to tell me what he admired about that particular song as poetry.

"I like the beat," he said.

"We aren't looking just for good beats," I said. "We're looking for really fine words in this project. Which words in this song do you really admire as good poetry? Can you show me some internal rhyme or a metaphor? Maybe a simile? Some alliteration?"

He frowned at the lyrics he had scribbled on a sheet of notebook paper. "Well, I don't really like the words that much," he admitted. "But it has a really good beat."

"Then you need to find another song with words that you do admire," I said. The following day he brought another song. It wasn't exactly the kind of song parents would appreciate, but it wasn't vulgar and obscene; because he was prepared to participate in his own learning for the first time, I accepted his contribution.

Two amazing things occurred after we completed that poetry project. First, my students didn't protest when I announced that we would be moving on to our textbooks to analyze and discuss classic poetry, including Shakespearean sonnets. Clearly, because they had analyzed and evaluated so many songs and original poems, they felt confident of their ability to tackle any poetry they might meet.

The second amazing thing was that my belligerent, pugnacious, disenchanted students unanimously elected "We Shall Be Free" as the best poetry of all the songs we read, which made me realize that instead of being amoral, apathetic young rebels, they were idealistic and hopeful children desperately in need of good adult leadership. For those who are unfamiliar with the song, here are the phrases that my students voted as best poetry:

*When the last child cries for a crust of bread*

*When the last man dies for just words that he said*

*When the last thing we notice is the color of skin*

*and the first thing we look for is the beauty within. . . .*

*. . . then we shall be free.*

A five-senses poem may work better as an introduction to poetry for teachers who work with young children or older students who may not be good candidates for a lyrics project. This poetry form does not require a complicated introduction, and it always elicits a response because it's fun to read and write. Begin by asking your class, "What does love smell like?" Some students will frown or become confused, but others will shout out answers. Acknowledge all answers and thank the students who suggested them.

Now, write the word *Love* on the board, indicating that it is the title of the poem. Below the title, you write each of the five senses:

Smells like

Looks like

Sounds like

Feels like

Tastes like

Ask students for suggestions and choose interesting responses to complete each line. You will end up with a poem. Here's one that a class of high school freshmen wrote:

### LOVE

*Smells like banana bread*

*Looks like a little baby*

*Sounds like a song*

*Feels like a hug*

*Tastes like ice cream*

Repeat this exercise with another word: *hate*, *school*, and *friends* are popular and all students can think of responses very easily. Be sure to encourage both literal and wildly imaginative answers, so students get the message that poetry is an art form and does not have a "right" answer. For example, one student might describe school as smelling like dry erase markers while another may describe it as smelling like dirty socks.

Next have students write two or three sense poems on their own, using words of their own choice. Ask for volunteers to read their poems aloud, and let the most enthusiastic poets write their poems on the board. At the end of this exercise, ask your students to give themselves a round of applause. Tell them, "Who knew you were such good poets?" You won't be lying, because they will surprise you with creative and thought-provoking examples.

I like to build on this exercise by encouraging students to copy out their poems on sheets of plain white or pastel paper, adding illustrations, and then tack their poetic artwork to the walls around the room. If you have the time and facilities, you might consider compiling them into a booklet that students can take home.

If you use this as your introduction to poetry, you have just demonstrated imagery and sensory detail. Now you will need to incorporate an overview of other poetic terms and techniques (appropriate for your grade level) into your subsequent lessons before you assign a portfolio assignment.

## POETRY PORTFOLIOS

After my first successful song lyric or poetry writing experiment, I design a poetry portfolio project for students to complete prior to sharing songs. The portfolio is a two-week project that includes teacher demonstrations and short lectures, guided practice, and individual activities. On the first day of the project, I go over the definitions of poetic techniques with the class, giving examples of each technique so that students can take notes to refer to during their individual work. Each day I introduce a different kind of poem (haiku, limerick, diamond poem, five-senses poem); after we read several samples, I ask the class to write a few examples with me and then complete some worksheets (Exhibits 7.1 and 7.2). Then they are free to work on their own portfolios (Exhibit 7.3). (If you have concerns about grading or monitoring portfolio assignments, see Chapter Ten.)

## SOURCES FOR COMPELLING READING MATERIALS

Until your students learn to enjoy reading, you may need to find materials to supplement their textbooks. I sometimes make copies of a short selection that is in their textbook because many students feel such antipathy toward anything in a textbook. If they notice later on, I pretend to be surprised to find such an interesting selection in their very own text. Here are just a few of the many sources I have used to find reading materials so interesting that students forget they are reading.

**www.bbc.co.uk/learning** This is my number-one pick of Internet sources. This Web site covers an incredible array of topics for every level of student from pre-school to college. The phonics, reading, and spelling games for children (also great for ESL students) are first-rate. The fact sheets, online activities, and quizzes for high school students are interesting and challenging (check out the graphics and games under biology and physics, for example). And the free online courses cover such a huge selection of topics that you could literally spend months at home studying each evening without exhausting the list.

**www.bbc.com** For social studies classes, this site provides an alternate view of news headlines. Students enjoy comparing U.S. newspaper reports of topics to those by British reporters. It helps them see how others view the United States.

### Exhibit 7.1. Poetry Worksheet 1.

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Write a simile: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Write a metaphor: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Write a short poem with the rhyme scheme AABB:

4. Write a line that contains internal rhyme: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Write an example of a person's name that uses alliteration: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Give three examples of onomatopoeic words: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Find a poem in your textbook that uses a metaphor.

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of poem: \_\_\_\_\_

Metaphor: \_\_\_\_\_

Is this metaphor effective? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Write a haiku. (It doesn't have to be great; just follow the format.)

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### Exhibit 7.2. Poetry Worksheet 2.

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_

*Directions:* On the blank line(s), write the poetic technique, form, or device that is shown in the example. The possibilities are **alliteration**, **free verse**, **haiku**, **end rhyme**, **metaphor**, **simile**, **personification**, **internal rhyme**, or **onomatopoeia**. You'll use some terms more than once, and some items will need two terms—not to trick you but because some poetry is complex. One line can contain internal rhyme and alliteration, for example.

1. My puppy whirls through the house like a little black tornado.  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. I love great big gooey chewy chunky chocolate chip cookies.  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. The tiny purple flowers danced and tossed their heads.  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. On my way home from school  
I was laughing like a fool  
Then I began to drool  
which was totally uncool  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Sometimes in the night, I wake and think of you  
You are right there beside me  
I can hear the beating of your heart  
I can feel you kiss my cheek  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Rat-a-tat-a-tat went the machine gun.  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Winter sneaked up on us when we weren't expecting her.  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Snowflakes fall softly  
Thousands of tiny white stars  
Shining in the night  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Kenny is a lean mean dancing machine.  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Homework is like a toothache: you can't ignore it.  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Exhibit 7.3. Poetry Portfolio Instructions.

For your grade on the poetry unit, you will be required to turn in a poetry portfolio. You may use any binder or folder you choose. If you are artistic, you may choose to draw a picture or otherwise illustrate the outside of your portfolio, but a plain cover is just fine.

During the next two weeks, we will read various poems in order to study and recognize poetic devices such as alliteration and onomatopoeia. In addition, we will analyze poetry, and you will write one literary essay, either interpreting a poem or comparing two poems. (Don't worry, we'll write the rough draft of each different kind of poem and drafts of your essays or interpretations in class, so that I can help you if you have problems!)

Your portfolio should contain the following items for a total of five hundred (500) points:

Poetry overview worksheet with definitions and examples	50
Roses are red poems or diamond poems	25
Five-senses poems	50
Word poems (that is, Brother, Sister)	25
Haiku or limericks	50
An illustrated poem (if you can't draw, use illustrations from a magazine)	50
"Your page" for English B (see Langston Hughes's poem)	50
Analysis of a Shakespearean sonnet or "Richard Cory"	100
Your literary essay about poetry	100

The items listed above are the minimum requirements for a passing grade. You may include additional original poetry in your portfolio.

Portfolios are due on \_\_\_\_\_

Late work will lose one letter grade per day (four days late = zero credit).